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SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/C
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SUBJECT: Cameroonian University Students Decry Corruption and Neglect

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. Cameroonian university students are frustrated with corruption, political influence, educational neglect, and perceived discrimination related to bilingualism within Cameroon's education system. They are generally afraid to discuss their problems, especially politics, but have on occasion confronted the university system. The thousands of discontented youth coming out of the universities each year may pose potential political challenges down the road. End summary.

More Than an Apple for the Teacher

¶2. (SBU) In meetings with Pol/Econ Intern, university students in Yaound lamented that corruption within the university system is rampant and mirrors the problems of corruption which permeate Cameroonian society. University administrators are nominated and appointed by President Paul Biya, they said, noting that the system falls prey to party favoritism, nepotism, and a general lack of efficiency as unqualified individuals are appointed to the administration to satisfy political needs.

¶3. (SBU) Students described several layers of corruption, including illicit transactions between professors, students, and the administration. Students contend that in order to receive instructional materials such as class notes, they are expected to pay varying sums of money to professors, who do not report the income to the university. Without cash in hand, a student is not permitted to view class material. According to our contacts, a considerable number of professors also accept sexual favors from students in exchange for better grades. In addition, some media stories recently exposed universities accused of selling fraudulent degrees and diplomas. One student tried to explain the corruption in the educational system by employing the phrase "intellectual prostitution," implying that professors are underpaid and thus find alternative strategies for obtaining income.

¶4. (SBU) Many students have reportedly lost faith in meritocracy as a driving factor in the Cameroonian educational system. Instead, family and tribal ties are seen as key to success. One passionate contact described Cameroonian youth as "un-studious" and "devoid of a work ethic," arguing that family name alone propels students into a career, not a diploma. A prominent university professor suggested scrapping the prestigious Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENAM, where many bureaucrats and judges get their start) because admission is so coupled with political, family, and money ties. This is valid for other professional schools like Ecole Normale (Higher Secondary Education Teachers Training School). The university system is beginning to implement regulations to decrease discrimination based on tribal or family identity, such as assigning students identification numbers to use on documents and exams rather than full names.

¶15. (U) Since Cameroon's independence, and even after educational reforms in 1973, the state has politicized the university system by insinuating that students should be groomed as potential future political candidates, even though the government is currently saturated with officials, according to student contacts. Faculty members continue to hold positions as businessmen and politicians in addition to their university posts. Student sources did not discredit these professors for having multiple job titles, but some voiced concerns that their multiple roles contributed to a decrease in the quality of education. Other students decried professors who are hired to teach a subject for which they lack the proper qualifications, further diminishing the credibility of the education sector. Contacts pointed to business professors who have impressive formal credentials but have never had any practical experience in the field and thus are seen as unqualified to teach business courses.

¶16. (SBU) In a group discussion, university students became exceedingly emotional when asked whether education stood as one of the government's priorities. One joked that education "was on a list, but not the priority list." Students detailed the many faults of the education system, including the fact that the government funds the military and the soccer team at the expense of education. Education in Cameroon is well financed but much of the money is squandered and the sector fails to satisfy the needs for up-to-date and accurate resource materials, the students said, pointing out that equipment and books in the libraries are so archaic that they feel unprepared to compete with their counterparts abroad. Students repeatedly cited the "lack of educational infrastructure." In addition to a dearth of government funding, students were disappointed in the perceived absence of future planning by the Ministry of Higher Education (Ministre de l'Enseignement Supérieur - MINESUP). Due to the lack of access to resources, students are unable to foresee what opportunities lay ahead since they are not fully aware of how or even where to acquire the information they seek. Pupils are excited by the possibility that more universities

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will be established in the future, but they are deeply skeptical that the universities will function well.

Concerns about Bilingual Separatism

¶17. (U) Cameroon has a dual education system. Families may choose to enroll their children in either the Francophone system or Anglophone system of education. Officially, all universities in Cameroon are bilingual. Professors can choose to lecture in French or English and students can submit work in either language as well. The only exception to this is the University of Buea, where instruction is only in English and all work submitted by students must be in English. Although Cameroon is officially both Francophone and Anglophone, in reality its two-language educational system results in some discrimination against Anglophones. While the Francophone system is dominant, the Anglophone system is beginning to gain in popularity, as students reportedly prefer the private Anglophone technical schools, which offer faster, more hands-on programs of study. While many students see bilingualism as a major plus on the global job market, others told us that because the majority of the country is French-speaking, those who attend Anglophone schools and only speak English experience employer discrimination upon entering the local job market.

Some Positive Steps in Education

¶18. (U) University students cited a few positive examples of what Cameroon is doing to advance in the education sector. For example, the government is allowing more private intuitions to be formed around the country, creating more opportunities for students to specialize in their choice of study. Internships, study abroad, university partnership, and work-study programs are being implemented throughout the country and becoming more accessible to

help fast track students into their careers. In 2005, the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) put in place the License, Masters, Doctorate (LMD) system as a means to standardize tertiary education systems. The University of Yaound I has started using student e-cards that serve as a central storage system for students to keep their entire collection of notes from past years electronically. MINESUP is making efforts to regularly update its website.

¶9. (SBU) In the 1990s, universities were a center of political activism, but today students are monitored and university administrators try to control foreign access to students. (NOTE: The Ambassador's frequent requests to meet with student groups are generally frustrated by administrators' insistence that they sit in on the meetings as well. END NOTE) Students tell us they are afraid to make educational demands because of the possible violent reaction of the regime. Nonetheless, there is some student activism and some students have formed advocacy groups targeting the government and corruption. In 2005, students protested academic and living conditions, leading to clashes with the security services and two student deaths. Several months ago, students at the University of Yaound I locked their administrators out of school to demonstrate against mismanagement.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) The thousands of educated youth coming out of the universities every year with poor job prospects and heightened cynicism about the political system could pose future political challenges. This situation is also spurring more students to want to leave the country. Post's Consular Section notes that, although student visa issuance dropped from 670 in 2007 to 663 in 2008, we have seen a steady rise in student visa applicants. Whether or not they want to study in America, university students appreciate Mission educational outreach from our EducationUSA Advising Center (EAC), our James Baldwin Information Resource Center (JBIRC) and other Public Affairs efforts, as well as from our Peace Corps and Consular and Pol/Econ Sections. End Comment.

GARVEY